FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Russians Dodge a Bullet - How Young Russian Men Avoid the Draft

By Elisabeth Braw, November 9, 2015

In Russia, military service is mandatory for men aged 18 to 27. But according to a recent European Parliamentary Research Service report, each year, half of all would-be conscripts—75,000 out of an annual intake of around 150,000 young men—are thought to be dodging the draft. And now the conflicts in Ukraine in Syria are expected to push those numbers even higher. The armed forces' autumn draft—which runs between October 1 and December 31 and involves 147,000 young men—could register greater reluctance to serve than any in recent memory. Of particular concern to Russia's armed forces are intelligent young men who enroll in Ph.D. programs, allowing them to put off service until they age out of the draft.

Muscovite Vladimir Berkhin, a young psychologist, recently started a doctoral program at a reputable university in his home city. "A young man who wants to avoid conscription in Russia can present himself as ill—mad, near-sighted, or something else," he explained to me, "or join to the non-armed service and serve as a policeman or a fireguard." None of those options appealed to him. Nor did joining the army. Russian conscripts have long been subjected to brutal and sometimes lethal hazing, which has driven hundreds to suicide.

And so Berkhin opted for doctoral studies. He doesn't consider himself a pacifist, and neither do most young men who avoid conscription. They just don't want to be exposed to initiation rituals, which range from performing demeaning tasks for higher-ranking soldiers to rape. In a survey quoted by Columbia's *Journal of International Affairs*, 70 percent of Russian men said that they were put off by the prospect of serving because of hazing. Aleksey, a 26-year-old from a city three hours east of Moscow, who asked that his real name not be used, likewise opted for doctoral studies. "It was a good and legal opportunity," the young historian said of his decision.

According to the European Parliamentary Research Service report, draft dodgers pay bribes to get out of service or opt for doctors' notes attesting to nonexisting illnesses. But paying bribes and acquiring doctors' notes attesting to fake illnesses are crimes. Although the crime doesn't always result in the perpetrator's being caught and tried, it still doesn't appeal to everyone. And the more intelligent among Russia's young men have a legal option: continued studies. In practice, in other words, Russia's academically gifted are safe from fighting.

"Among my friends, only one has done military service, and that's because he really wanted to," said Eugene Kulikov, a senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.

Academic deferment is, of course, nothing new. During the Vietnam War, 16 million Americans requested draft deferments, many by enrolling in additional bachelor's or master's degree programs. Likewise, in the Soviet Union, draft dodging was endemic during the Afghanistan war, which ended in 1989. In a top-secret 1988 report, which has since been declassified, the CIA notes that the Soviet elite bribed their (and their sons') way out of deployment to Afghanistan and military service. According to the CIA, avoiding service in Afghanistan carried a 2,000–5,000 ruble price tag, an enormous sum considering that in 1988 only seven percent of Soviet households earned more than 250 rubles per month.

What is different in Russia today is the scale of avoiding service and the industries that have been built up around it. In the past 20 years, private universities—some with questionable academic standards—have mushroomed, as have doctoral degrees. According to government statistics, 132,002 students were pursuing doctoral degrees in 2013, compared to 59,314 in 1991. In a 2011 report in the scientific journal *Troitsky Variant*, 32 percent of surveyed Ph.D. students (45 percent of male Ph.D. students) gave draft deferment as a reason for having enrolled, making it men's third most common motivation after "desire to pursue academic research" and "career development." (Respondents could give more than one reason.)

"Roughly speaking, there are two types of male Ph.D. students," said Igor Chirikov, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Education, HSE University Moscow. "For the first category, avoiding military service is an important bonus that allows them to continue their studies without interruption, and for the second category draft deferment is the goal in itself." The first group seems to be larger, Chirikov said, because pursuing doctoral studies is a relatively complicated way of avoiding conscription. Studying at state universities is free, but it involves performance reviews; studying at unregulated private universities is expensive, but can be much easier. But, he added, "there are clearly students who enroll in doctoral programs simply to avoid military service, and that presents a challenge for the higher education policy in the country."

And the government is beginning to crack down on what Chirikov calls the diploma-mill industry, primarily by conducting quality assessments of private universities, which now educate some five million of Russia's seven million university students. Earlier this year, Dmitry Livanov, the education and science minister, announced that the government also plans to cut the number of universities by 40 percent. At the same time, the government has

tried to improve living conditions in the military to make service more appealing—for example, by building new barracks and shortening military service to one year.

None of it, however, seems to have worked. According to statistics from Rosstat, Russia's official statistics agency, during the first half of 2014 the number of military crimes such as desertion, draft dodging, and hazing increased by 17 percent, resulting in 1,409 criminal cases.

The doctoral rush may not be all bad. After all, Russia benefits from having more highly educated citizens. But the Armed Services could use some of those young men, too. The military is undergoing a 19 trillion ruble ($295 billion) modernization program featuring the introduction of highly sophisticated weaponry. "The Armed Forces' human resource situation is an obstacle to reaching the country's ambitious military modernization goals," said Katarzyna Zysk, a professor at the Norwegian Defense University College. "And the demographic decline in Russia means that there are fewer men eligible for military service. The lack of personnel has already led to understaffing in military units." A conscript corps featuring large numbers of soldiers who are stuck in the service simply because they were not crafty or wealthy enough to dodge the draft is hardly a good match for advanced weaponry.

The Kremlin is keenly aware of Russia's conscription malaise and has directed the Armed Forces to phase out conscription. By 2017, the Armed Forces are required to have 425,000 professional soldiers—almost half of the total manpower needed—but professionalization is taking longer than planned. In the meantime, the force will suffer. "The need to operate advanced military technology is one of the main reasons behind the increased need for highly qualified and well-trained personnel," Zysk said. "That need is best satisfied by professional soldiers rather than conscripts. But because the Ministry of Defense is struggling to acquire the sufficient number of contract soldiers, Russia still depends on the conscript force for many of the key tasks."

Until professionalization is completed, the Armed Forces have found a way to catch at least some people who have avoided the draft in its net. Two years ago, it created elite squads consisting of conscripted scientists that have already produced 130 military innovations and 350 academic papers. The government could abolish students' draft exemption. But forcefully tackling hazing would have much better odds of improving conscription rates.